

POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE IN BANGLADESH: CONTEMPORARY CRISES

Crisis of governance has become endemic in Bangladesh irrespective of regimes. Concerns of general people are thus always on the increase. In fact, political parties of the land have miserably failed to establish a consensus over the ground rules for democratic competition and dissent (Jahan, 2000). It is no wonder that such politics breeds a politicized bureaucracy and a malfasant system of law and order. And, these instruments of governance, operating without accountability and transparency, leads to the machinery of state being used as a political resource rather than an instrument of governance (Sobhan, 2000).

It is obvious that good governance is a must for the development and growth of a nation (World Bank, 1997). And, the most important distinction among countries relates not to their form of government but to their degree of government (Huntington, 1968). The tumultuous politics and politicized state institutions have always had a bearing on governance and Bangladesh case is hardly an exception.

As government has to function through various systems and processes of the government machinery and private initiatives, the precondition is that the machinery and processes be good, flexible, sound, efficient, cost-effective and objective in approach. A nation's governance plays the vital role in shaping the destiny of its people (Ghosh, 2003: 28). Good governance, since ancient times, has been conceptualized as an ideal state. This notion endures even now, as good governance is seen to bring in happiness and welfare of the people. It is also associated

with efficient and effective administration in a democratic framework (Vayunandan, 2003:16).

Every time elections take place in Bangladesh with the hope of transition from one generation of politicians to the next so that corruption lessens and good prospects for effective governance prevail (Rahman, 2006: 374). However, frustration becomes the ultimate result more often than not. And, centering the previous 2009 elections, there was an absolute chaos in the country (Quddusi, 2010).

Bangladesh is now going through a very intriguing period of time with the people suffering and the state machinery remaining in a quandary. While people's hardships seem to be a predestined affair in the context of Bangladesh's chequered political history, the state machinery's predicament results from the lackadaisical approach our ministers are used to taking in serving the country. Some ministers of the government have already become laughing stocks with their gratuitous remarks. Some troublesome issues facing Bangladesh severely are enumerated below under various headings:

Shutdowns and Showdowns

Of late, shutdowns and showdowns have become the order of the day in the country (Quddusi, April 10, 2013). Shutdowns by the opposition and on occasions by the pro-government forces, showdowns by the forces and counter-forces are now the regular features of contemporary Bangladesh. The government, on the other hand, seems to be shutting all the doors. Nothing good seems in sight. However, one thing remains guaranteed and that is immense sufferings of the masses to which none seems to have the time to really look at.

A day of shutdown causes a loss of Tk 1,600 crore to the businesses of all segments - from exports to retail shops, a leading chamber said in a survey released recently. In accordance with Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), the country faces, on average, 40 days of shutdowns a year, which means the financial losses stand at Tk 64,000 crore or 6.5 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP)

and the garment sector takes the hardest blow, counting Tk 360 crore in loss for a day of shutdown (*The Daily Star*, April 5, 2013).

A number of points are at issue these days. And, number of items on the list seems to be increasing day by day. Reinstatement of caretaker government, trials of war criminals, banning of Jamaat-Shibir, Gonojagoron Mancha's 6 points, Hefajate Islam's 13 points have really filled up the table by now. Interestingly, under pressure of other demands and pressures, the main opposition BNP's main agendum of caretaker government gets submerged most of the time. Of late, however, Hefajate Islam's 13 points are hogging the headlines more often than not.

Though Hefajate Islam claims itself to be a non-political organisation, almost all of its demands are highly political. This matter is really riveting both historically as well as academically. As far as we know, Gonojagoron Mancha started their movement basically for fair trials of war criminals. At that time, Jamaat and Shibir were their core counterparts. However, with the passage of time, Hefajate Islam seems to have appeared as a more vibrant counterpart.

Though Shahbag organisers have repeatedly claimed themselves to be not anti-Islamists, a section of people and media in the country seem to have been up and doing in depicting them as anti-Islamists. Though it is difficult to say to what extent Hefajate Islam and Islam itself would be benefitted from this twist as well as branding, Jamaate Islami seems to have appeared as an apparent gainer. Though they now seem to have the laugh, it is really difficult, in our politics and context, to say who will, in fact, have the last laugh.

A good number of demands of Hefajate Islam are highly debatable. They have categorically pointed out that their 13 points would have to be implemented to stay in or come back to power. This is, in fact, very significant in context of our politics. Though Hefajate Islam seems to have appeared as a force to be reckoned with, it is too early to say to what extent they are serious in their intentions. From their body language, however, it

appears that they are resolute in their endeavours and are likely to march forward.

Though they have come up with clear suggestions against co-education, they have not yet made their stance clear about women leadership. It is, however, a recognised fact they are, by ideology, opposed to women leadership. If they really mean it, it will have far-reaching consequences for women leadership in the country and more so for Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. It will be really interesting to see whether they move forward against women leadership or not because Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia are still the mainstays of Bangladesh politics.

It is not unlikely that Hefajate Islam and their fellows in our political arena might any time turn up with the agenda of restricting women's education and activities. Hefajate Islam and their fellows seem to have garnered handsome number of followers in the country. However, number of women as well as working women in the country is not few.

Meanwhile, rise of Gonojagoron Mancha and onset of Hefajate Islam are being termed as consequences of weaknesses of mainstream political parties in the country. It is being anticipated that more and more such phenomena and symptoms are to creep up in future if the mainstream political parties keep up their standoff as well as bickering. Though Gonojagoron Mancha has lately focused their attention on the demand of banning Jamaat-Shibir, Hefajate Islam has a lot of agenda on their table.

Anyway, major political parties would have to come to their senses before it is too late. They would have to realise that power is not the last word in politics. However, both the major political parties seem to be faltering in their pursuit of retaining and regaining power and, in the process, forces and counter forces are posing to alter the notion of democracy and governance. If the current stalemate continues, the consequences are unlikely to be wholesome for the ones who really love our independence as well as progress.

Successes and Slips

During its four and half years of tenure, Awami League (AL) government has not had too few achievements. However, the good deeds are being slowly yet surely eclipsed by the lapses either committed or allowed to be committed (Quddusi, January 12, 2012). The upper hand in national politics is thus being slowly shifted towards the opposition for which only AL is to blame. Erring ministers and intractable Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL) have done a fair amount of damage to the party's image.

Callousness on the part of the leadership is also contributing to descent of things. Entreaties were consistent against the ministers and appeals were universal against the activities of the wings of AL. But, the party in power paid no heed whatsoever. There were only subterfuges for which the people felt all the more outraged. AL clean forgot the fact that the days of taking people for granted are now the matters of olden days.

The government has had unique success in agriculture sector. Rice production at the time of our independence was 1 crore 10 lakh metric tons. During the last 40 years, about one fourth of our cultivable land has been lost. However, rice production has surpassed 3 crore 50 lakh metric tons in 2012. This is no less than a revolution for which the farmers of the land have to be saluted. Agriculture minister Matia Chowdhury definitely deserves kudos for leading the revolution.

Bangladesh has made headways in ensuring food security as well. Food reserve has already reached 17 metric tons which is to cross 20 lakh metric tons soon. Education ministry under the leadership of Nurul Islam Nahid has brought about another revolution in the education sector, especially in terms of supplying text books to millions in time. After about 40 years of independence, we have got an inclusive and time-befitting education policy, too.

Laudable efforts are on to streamline the education system by replacing the multidimensional one that smacks of

sheer discrimination. Great strides in use and proliferation of information and communication technologies have also been made. Internets have reached the commoners. Facile internet facilities have been made available by the government at the village level. Power crisis has lessened to a degree.

Among the failures, deteriorating law and order and intractable law enforcers and their official violence were prominent. In addition to failed ministers and unruly BCL, failures of the government include flaws in combating corruption coupled with weakening of Anti-corruption Commission, attempts towards politicisation of civil and police administration and abortive attempts for constructing airports. In fact, such attempts were literally counterproductive as people of the chosen areas got really irritated.

Table 1: Array of violence in Bangladesh

<i>Type of Violence</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012</i>
<i>Extra-judicial killing</i>	154	127	84	70
<i>Death in jail</i>	50	60	105	63
<i>Disappearances</i>	3	18	30	24
<i>Torture (Dead and Alive)</i>	89	67	46	72
<i>Attack on journalists (including killed, injured, assaulted, attacked, threatened)</i>	221	231	259	289
<i>Political violence: Killed</i>	251	220	135	169
<i>Acid violence</i>	101	137	101	105
<i>Dowry related violence (only women prime victims of dowry)</i>	319	378	516	822
<i>Rape</i>	456	559	711	805
<i>Public lynching</i>	127	174	161	132
<i>Readymade garments factory: Dead</i>	7	33	4	115
<i>Enforcement of Section 144 of Criminal Procedure Act</i>	28	114	103	105

Source: Odhikar, 2012:107

The successes of the government have also been tarnished by some decisions. The decision to dissect the capital did not go down well with the residents of Dhaka, the fallout of which might be all the more painful for AL if the party nominees fail to pass the tests in the two Dhaka city corporation elections. AL's perceived fear of not winning mayoral polls in one Dhaka has also gained currency. In passing, AL's recent election luck is running low.

Though the government's intent to strengthen the Election commission (EC) is laudable, its backing behind a really capable and committed EC has not been buttressed enough by its actions. However, the caretaker issue is very likely to surface with all its vengeance in foreseeable future. The ruling party's dalliance with the caretaker issue has already been branded as a blunder.

Advisers and Adversaries

Daily Sun has recently brought out a very revealing report in which the job description of the advisers, who have been superimposed upon the ministries, has been wanted to know (Quddusi, February 23, 2012). The news item has also clearly indicated that their tussles with ministers are damaging the functions of ministries. In fact, such an observation has been in the air since long. Thus, a very pertinent question arises as to whether the advisers are there to make or mar or whether they exist to assist or to resist.

The report also adds that application of authority over related ministries by the advisers to the prime minister has created strained relations with the ministers concerned, resulting in disorder in the function of those ministries. In fact, the disagreements between the ministers -- mainly elected representatives and the advisers drawn from among retired bureaucrats and academics -- in running various government affairs have been obvious in the past three years.

The allegation is now ubiquitous that although the advisers are expected to facilitate activities of ministries, they

have been interfering in most activities that are supposed to be carried out by the ministers as heads of the ministries concerned. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appointed the advisers to advise her on various affairs and issues, monitor the activities of ministries and thus bring dynamism in the functions of key ministries.

Though the prime minister appointed them in her own power, the advisers are not yet constitutionally authorised to exercise any power. The seven advisers are HT Imam for public administration, Dr Alauddin Ahmed for education, social affairs and politics, Dr Gawher Rizvi for international affairs, Dr Syed Modasser Ali for health, Dr Mashiur Rahman for economic affairs, Dr Toufiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury for energy, and Maj Gen (ret'd) Tariq Ahmed Siddiqui for defence.

As very rightly commented in the daily sun report, the government appointed Dipu Moni as the foreign minister and Dr Gawher Rizvi as the PM's adviser on foreign affairs. However, they have failed to uphold Bangladesh's image and realise the country's interests in striking essential deals. An alarming concomitant of this failure is that public servants appointed to each embassy are performing things without properly taking care of national interests.

The education minister and the education adviser engaged themselves in conflicts on a number of issues. In Bangladesh, public image of civil servants is very poor which is evident from the Table 2 and erring advisers added to the problem.

Table 2: Popular perceptions of civil servants in Bangladesh
(Question: To what extent you agree or disagree with these following statements?)

<i>In general, civil servants (are)</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Quite Disagree</i>	<i>Partly Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<i>Treat all equally</i>	32	39	20	9	100	2.05
<i>Friendly</i>	17	47	29	7	100	2.24
<i>Reliable/trustworthy</i>	12	56	28	4	100	2.24
<i>Helpful and responsive</i>	14	49	32	5	100	2.29
<i>Disrespectful to citizens</i>	6	39	41	14	100	2.64
<i>Prompt and efficient</i>	7	25	59	9	100	2.69
<i>Not fully aware of their duties/responsibilities</i>	9	30	40	21	100	2.72
<i>Corrupt</i>	3	18	46	33	100	3.11
<i>Serve their personal interests instead of that of the citizens</i>	4	19	41	36	100	3.11
<i>Difficult to get access to</i>	5	14	41	40	100	3.16
<i>Practice nepotism</i>	3	9	44	44	100	3.30
<i>Act on tadbirs/suparish (Unlawful persuasion)</i>	1	6	54	49	100	3.40

N.B. Percentage distribution and mean score on each characteristic has been provided in the table

Source: Askvik 2011: 104

Their conflict over transfers and postings of officials has even resulted in non-disbursement of a multilateral lending agency's funds for the poor. The situation in the energy and mineral resources ministry is terrible. In that ministry, everyone looks to the adviser for his directive as the state minister has hardly any say. Thus, normal activities of the ministry are being seriously hampered.

While some civil servants consider the advisers' monitoring of the functions of the ministries as a positive step, others say that they are really embarrassed at the unexpected tug-of-war between the advisers and the ministers. In fact, a kind of diarchy in these ministries has been in place for long causing severe damage to their proper functioning.

Many have very rightly raised queries about the role of the advisers in administrative affairs of the ministries concerned. The benefits or losses for the government from their appointment or their standing in the government have also been questioned. Though they have no place in the constitution as regards official authority, the advisers' activities imply that they are placed above the ministers.

Admittedly, appointment of so many advisers in the presence of a functional cabinet and their undue exercise of power have been first-time in the country. There are about 50 members of the cabinet, including the advisers, who are taking part in cabinet meetings.

Though, in Bangladesh, the advisers have been appointed to strengthen the Prime Minister's hands in running the government, some of them have turned lives of various ministers into veritable hell. Though they are expected to serve national interests first, they seem to be giving utmost indulgence to their personal interests and choices. Thus, the very objective of dynamism of the ministries is being hit at the root. It is high time the PM had a cost-benefit analysis of having so many advisers, most of whom have a tendency to guide less and misguide more.

Ministers and Miseries

The World Bank's cancellation of fund for Padma Bridge has had international connotations for Bangladesh (Quddusi, July 5, 2012). Though the World Bank was contemplating on cancelling the funding, sudden decision has really raised many eyebrows. Other financiers might also follow suit, as ADB has done. Though the World Bank (WB) is talking about noncompliance of conditions after alleged corruption by Bangladeshi incumbents' including the then Communications minister, the ministers in the government smell 'something else' in the whole affair.

People from the ruling bench, the opposition and the government functionaries are coming out with interesting comments almost frequently following and about the

cancellation. Finance Minister AMA Muhith has termed the World Bank's statement derogatory to the nation as well as totally unacceptable. Though the Finance Minister took it as a personal remark of WB's outgoing President Robert Zoellick, new World Bank President Jim Yong Kim has confirmed the decision as 'appropriate'.

Communications Minister Obaidul Quader termed the move unfortunate and mysterious, while the prime minister's economic affairs adviser Mashiur Rahman expressed disappointment at the credit cancellation nearly a month before the loan could be effectuated on July 27, 2012. They insisted that allegations of perceived corruptions in the project had not been proved yet. The communications minister also called the bank's decision "a bolt from the blue."

The BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia, however, did not take time to cash in on the cancellation and said that if her party was elected to power in future, the people involved in the Padma bridge corruption would be brought to justice. Interestingly, however, complaints of corruption against her party men and kith and kin were plenty while they were in power during their last regime. Nonetheless, her optimism is well and good.

Unfortunately, too, our leaders of both camps find fault only with the opposition and keep mum while allegations against their own people are raised. Meanwhile, Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Chairman Ghulam Rahman revealed that the World Bank had earlier suggested that the commission seize the bank accounts and travel documents of former communications minister Syed Abul Hossain and high officials of his family-owned company SAHCO.

Though the World Bank's complaints of corruption or corruption conspiracy have not yet been proved beyond doubt, the allegations against communications minister Syed Abul Hossain encourage one to give credit to the World Bank's points

as Abul Hossain gained a lot of infamy while he was in the charge of communications ministry. Many in the country are even expressing quite overtly that the country has been subjected to this libel only due to this bloke.

All traffic across the Padma now has to rely on ferries. The announcement cancelling the WB's largest such credit to a member country comes days after Bangladesh rejected the bank's conditions that the government send officials allegedly involved in the corruption on leave until the probe is completed. The conditions also stipulated that Bangladesh should appoint a special inquiry team in the ACC to handle the probe, and provide a WB-appointed panel full access to all investigative information.

As long as the government has to rely on the World Bank and other world lending organisations, it has to comply with some conditions. If the conditions are for ensuring transparency and accountability, there can be no reasons for noncompliance. Though compliance should not be met sacrificing the country's greater interest, noncompliance, if any, resulting from protecting any corrupt element is totally unacceptable for which the government as a whole is answerable to the nation.

Politics and Polemics

Kind of see-saw grips our politics more often than not (Quddusi, December 13, 2012). Glimmers of hope flicker and then diminish. New options and possibilities seem to surface and then disappear. In fact, our political horizon has become really kaleidoscopic these days. While BNP is threatening to launch serious movements for neutral caretaker government in near future, AL seems to be far away from such an idea.

AL is banking heavily on the Supreme Court verdict and placing real emphasis on the notion that an unelected entity cannot head such a government. Though various ideas and

options surface and resurface from various quarters, AL and BNP stalwarts are still poles apart. Thus, the Gordian knot is just likely to be tightened with the passage of time.

The ruling AL-led Grand alliance government is towards the end of its tenure. Though a reshuffle in the cabinet was long overdue, its latest reshuffle had a mixed impact with two prominent political personalities of the country Tofail Ahmed and Rashed Khan Menon refusing to join the cabinet. These refusals hardly served the cause of the ruling Mohajote government burdened with various scams such as corruptions charges against a good number of advisers, two ministers and the devastating Hallmark scandal.

Unfortunately for the government, it could not handle any issue properly and thus drew public reactions. One must say that AL's failure to deal with the delicate issues of corruption charges against the ministers and the advisers have had profound impact upon its sympathizers and the masses. Stern and timely actions against the suspects would have bolstered its image. However, the AL leadership just misread the situation and went for salvaging the suspects at the initial stage.

Table 3: Popular opinions about politics and politicians in Bangladesh
(*Question: What is your opinion on the following statements?*)

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Quite Disagree</i>	<i>Partly Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<i>Politicians do what is right most of the time</i>	12	58	24	6	100	2.24
<i>Most of the politicians are competent people, who know what they are doing</i>	11	52	27	10	100	2.35
<i>When I think of the system of government in Bangladesh, I feel like an outsider</i>	14	38	34	14	100	2.50
<i>There is no point in voting: parties</i>	16	22	32	30	100	2.77

<i>do what they want to do any</i>						
<i>Generally speaking, the country is run by a few interests</i>	8	31	31	30	100	2.83
<i>People like me has no possibility in influencing politics</i>	11	23	33	33	100	2.88
<i>The present political system is rotten</i>	10	20	41	29	100	2.90
<i>Politicians are more corrupt</i>	3	12	41	44	100	3.27
<i>Politicians serve their own interests rather than those of the public</i>	3	11	42	44	100	3.27
<i>Generally speaking, this country is run for the benefit of all the people</i>	2	11	45	42	100	3.27
<i>Most politicians promise a lot, but do not do anything</i>	2	12	37	49	100	3.34
<i>If citizens do not trust government anymore, things go wrong</i>	4	3	29	64	100	3.54
<i>What we need is strong leaders who tell us what to do</i>	4	4	18	75	100	3.63

N.B. Percentage distribution and mean score on each statement has been provided in the table

Source: Askvik 2011: 105-106

From the real spotlight of our political parties, one thing is pretty clear that they are more pro-power than pro-people. It is true that it is difficult to serve the people without going to power. However, it has been seen from the regimes of all our major political parties that they, while in power, forget about the core concepts of governance, let alone good governance. That's why we have yet to taste good governance even after decades of restoration of democracy. Table 3 gives us a clear picture as to how our politicians are treated by the masses these days.

Conclusions

Bangladesh is faced with numerous challenges for long (Quddusi, 2008). The people, however, hold the key to bringing the derailed leaders and incumbents to their knees. Democracy has provided us with the very weaponry whereby we can make them mend their ways. Coming out of the stereotyped absentee landlord role, we can very well assert ourselves to be as real owners. For that to happen, however, we have to grasp the true meaning of democracy in that it is not just consigning power from one group to another. Maybe, such a day will come when our politicians will start caring for the people and provide relief to the people from their perennial petulance and consequential loss and sufferings. Only the providence can say when that opportune moment will appear. Till then, however, we might have to bear with the painful satire, that is, - suffer, suffer and suffer.

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